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River delta plan facing critical fork, Bay Institute says

■ Environmentalist reminds policymakers
that the issue is still volatile.

By Mark Grossi
The Fresno Bee

LOS ANGELES — The broken bones may have mended, but not everyone involved in last December's train wreck over California water standards believes that the tracks are clear enough yet to avoid a similar fate next month.

In the 11 months since the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency proposed tough Sacramento/San Joaquin Delta River standards that briefly opened a gaping rift between state and federal officials, much healing has taken place.

Last week at the California Water Policy conference, a cross section of policymakers sounded

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Water: River delta alliance volatile, environmentalist says

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like Woodstock II, discussing an urban-agriculture alliance plan to revive the environmentally damaged delta and save some water in the process.

But as thoughts turned to the Dec. 15 EPA announcement of final standards, which may be influenced by the alliance plan, an environmental group broke up the lovefest.

"This [urban-agriculture] package is not equivalent to [the] EPA [package]," said Dave Behar, representing the Bay Institute. "Right now, we oppose it. There's a meeting scheduled Tuesday, let's hope it goes well."

Since the first EPA proposals were part of a lawsuit settlement between the government and environmentalists, Behar's statement was a reminder of a decade of gridlock and frustration over the delta.

"They haven't looked for consensus [with the environmental community]," said Behar. "They're going back to Washington and walking the halls to get everyone back there to sign off on this plan. It's the same old story."

But the alliance has consulted some environmentalists, officials said. The problem, as alliance members saw it, was bringing together urban and agricultural interests.

"This is a fairly unusual coalition, a tenuous coalition," said B.J. Miller, engineering consultant for water users and a participant in the alliance. "This is a tough sell for water users to go back and tell their boards of directors."

The alliance members, estranged partners during federal irrigation reform in the 1990s, were stunned and reunited by the proposals last December. Their common interest is the billions of gallons of water they get each year from the delta for farms and southern cities.

The federal and state governments, locked early this year in a power struggle over control of the delta, have since joined in a sweeping agreement to fix California's water problems.

"We need to become better at ego-management as well as eco-management," said Felicia Marcus, EPA regional administrator.

And, all factions, including the environmentalists, agree on one major point:

More than 1 million acre-feet of river water will have to remain in the delta to help young fish steer clear of giant water pumps and to mix with salt water to provide healthy food chain conditions. The sticking point on this issue centers on how much more than 1 million acre-feet is needed.

The EPA standards proposed in 1993 would have left 1.6 million acre-feet in the delta. The revised standards under discussion this year have been as low as 1.1 million.

The alliance would like to see it closer to 1 million, a little less than a fifth of the water pumped out of the delta for farms and cities.

"We're a hell of a lot closer than we've ever been," said Harry Seraydarian, director of EPA's water management division.

No matter what standards the federal government sets next month, the State Water Resources Control Board must hold hearings and finally decide if the standards will be used. The process would probably take another year.

That means the delta would continue to operate under provisions of the Endangered Species Act, which protect the endangered winter-run salmon and the threatened delta smelt.

And another fish is expected to be listed next month.

Endangered Species protections have curtailed water pumping in the delta and resulted in cutbacks to west side San Joaquin Valley farmers on federal and state water projects.

Seraydarian said federal fisheries agencies may not come up with a single-number limit of fish that will be allowed to die in the water pumps next year. Instead, the limit may be a range of numbers, creating more flexibility for pumping.

Members at the Los Angeles conference wondered if the fish limit, the delta fix or water allocations would be affected by the Republican takeover in Congress earlier this month. Most conference members said they didn't think it would affect the situation at the moment.